



Child sexual abuse is a silent epidemic throughout the world, creating social havoc. It can be prevented and it can be treated with a conscious and sustained effort. Stop the Silence provides that effort.

Why Survivors of CSA Often Do Not Tell for Years, and What That Means for Changes in Statutes of Limitations and Other Reforms

By Pamela Pine, Founder and CEO, Stop the Silence

People in disbelief often ask: Why did she [a victim of child sexual abuse (CSA)] wait so long to tell about her abuse? I mean, it happened 40 years ago. And NOW she's coming forward? Come on.

Yes, come on... There are reasons. Let's understand what's going on here - it's important, to our kids, our families, our communities, and our world... Do read on...

We know... The "targeted" child is often the vulnerable child - either psychologically or physically. The child who can be manipulated and "bought" due to need (food) or neglect (lack of basic care). The isolated or shy child. The simple answer to the question of why victims/survivors don't tell is: The level of fear, shame, manipulation and/or distrust that manifests as a result of an offender's handling of the child controls that child. The child does not know what to do. When children are vulnerable, they can wind up on the streets and in current and future detrimental and violent relationships due to psychological trauma and boundary issues.

We know... There is a grooming process that goes on that reduces the likelihood of a child coming forward at all. Grooming often begins with a deniable act (e.g., brushing against a child... "Oh, nothing happened - she did not understand; I just was trying to get by!") and extends beyond that simple act. The offender gets bolder and bolder as lies and gifts and manipulation are used to control the child, and the child no longer knows what to do. For examples: "Would you like this cute stuffed animal?" "Jewelry?" For runaway kids, it can be food or shelter. The offender may say: "This was your fault - you know you wanted it"; "No one will believe you"; "Everyone will be angry at you;"; "Everyone will laugh at you"; "This is what people do who love each other - and I know you love me, right?"; "I will hurt you... your mother, sister, etc.... if you tell." The child, not being the developmental, intellectual, or physical match to his or her perpetrator, will not know how to act or be able to hold off that person. The longer it goes on and the more intense the abuse becomes, the harder it can become to come forward; the child is captured emotionally.

Let me give you an easy example of what children will believe from adults who, after all, have power, control, knowledge, etc. Once, when my son was little and the family was driving to a vacation spot about 6 hours away, my son started asking, as kids do: "Are we there yet-are we there yet-are we there yet?" And, finally, I was tired of answering the question, and, though I felt a little odd about doing it, I told him: "When the leaves on the trees and the grass are blue, you will know we are there." Well, he believed me. He was 5. What did he know? Mom says there's blue grass somewhere? There's blue grass somewhere. When we got there, he said, "But..." I never did that again, but hopefully, it illustrates my point: kids believe what we say, no matter how unbelievable it may be to adults. Then, remember, most offenders know and have regular access to their victims - the offenders are usually from the immediate community (at least 90%) and a large percentage of offenders are actually family members (in the U.S. nearly 40% of all offenders are family members).

We know... The closer the offender is to the child, the more control that someone can have on that child. And the closer it is to home, literally and figuratively, the harder it is to deal with the situation and the offender. It's "easy" to want a stranger put away for being bad. It is harder to want that for Chris' dad - a pillar of the community! Not to mention the shame that the family often feels if a family or close community member is the offender. The kid who comes forward and tells is often up against the parent or caregiver who says, "That is a lie. Uncle Bobby would never do that!" Or, "don't tell - it will just create problems."

Often, children are just not capable of knowing what to think or do without our (us, the protective adults) guidance. Kids believe adults. They listen to our mandates. We help them define their feelings and their world. Unless we come to understand CSA ourselves, speak about CSA, look after our children and others' children well, AND teach children that if something happens that is uncomfortable for them, they should come to us, we will not be able to stem this tide well or quick enough to prevent many more children and many more survivors. We need to learn how to listen, carefully. Then find out what is going on. Then act. We know that children very, very rarely make this stuff up – they do not have the knowledge of developmental capacity to make it up; if they are talking about, drawing, or trying to perform sexual acts at 7 years old, for example, where did they get this information?

If we don't learn to deal with CSA, many children and adults will not tell out of fear, shame, and stigma. Many children will suppress the abuse for many years, often decades, until his or her adults self cannot suppress it any longer. Their psyches have been protecting them. Whatever happens to that child, the adult child holds the secret. And sometimes, those abused reproduce similar behaviors as their offenders, often unconsciously - they have been exposed to the behaviors and then have often unwanted feelings and behaviors that then manifest themselves, including secrecy, control, and manipulation; they have been trained by the best. The generational/societal aspect of the abuse can continue in this way.

But, ultimately, the suppression affects their mental and/or physical health and it starts to manifest in other ways. They are alcoholics, or they are drug abusers, or they have been clinically depressed for some time, or they have developed personality disorders, or they have had one after another violent or otherwise dysfunctional relationships, or they can't determine who really cares and who does not, or they have had hundreds of casual sexual encounters, or they have been prostitutes, or they have an eating disorder, etc. Or, they all of a SUDDEN, start remembering the abuse because they stop drinking or their minds just cannot contain the memories any longer for other reasons. And they cannot NOT deal with it - ANY MORE. And they try to find a way to cope. Or they finally tell. Maybe they find themselves in therapy. Too often, it winds up much worse.

And THAT is why many survivors of child sexual abuse do not come forth until many, many years after the abuse occurs if at all. Understanding these issues and the need for changes in – and preferably the elimination of – the Statutes of Limitations and other policies are critical. So are education and training programs. If we do not understand and come to be able to discuss and address CSA with our children and in public forums, we are, in effect, accepting the occurrence of child sexual abuse, as well as accepting that perpetrators may remain among us untreated and/or unpunished. We can be braver and better than that. Our children and our society are too important not to.

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“Courage does not always roar. Sometimes, it is the quiet voice at the end of the day that says I will try again tomorrow.”
Mary Anne Radmacher